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MRS. RHODA BISSELL THOMAS.

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By Hon. J. Nick Perrin.

Full many a career has been checked before a rounded-out consummation has brought about a realization of that highest fruition which is the merit for real worth. This seemingly unfortunate fact is presented throughout the history of the human race. If the great central figure of our Civil War had not been removed by what appears to have been an untimely end, the course of national affairs in this country might have and probably would have been different; at least to the extent of having brought about a speedier (and at the same time, amicable) solution of certain vexed questions which lingered through our reconstruction period. But, whatever we may think of the decree, the law of Fate is inexorable. The case of William H. Bissell was no exception to this historic rule. Fate decreed a short career for him, but, its very brilliancy has led Illinois and the nation to mourn for half a century over the disappearance of one of the brightest stars in the constellation of our national firmament. Bissell was born in New York in 1811. He died in the Executive Mansion at Springfield, Illinois, in 1860. During the nine and forty years of his life he was, in turn, a schoolmaster, a doctor, a lawyer, a soldier and a statesman. In 1837 he came west and settled in the American Bottom in Monroe County. About that time, Illinois was beginning to assume a conspicuous place among the states of the Union. The internal improvement system gave a stimulus to the upbuilding of our vast prairies. In 1839 our Capitol was moved from Vandalia to Springfield. The public men who functioned at the Capitol began to attract national attention. Reynolds and Ford, Douglas and Breese and Shields and a host of their class, appeared to form an array of which the new State could well be proud. In 1846, the Mex-

ican War broke out. In Illinois, nine regiments volunteered. The national government, however, only needed and accepted six. Bissell enlisted as a private from St. Clair County, but was elected at Alton as the colonel of the regiment,. His distinguished services in Mexico, next to those of Shields, who was the brigadier general of the Illinois contingent, brought him so prominently before the people, that, on the organization of a new party (the Republican party in 1856) he was made its standard bearer and was elected as governor. He died in 1860 before the expiration of his term. Had he lived, he might have been the president of the United States; for Governor Charles P. Johnson of Missouri, and Judge John B. Hay of Illinois, (contemporaries of Bissell's) are living witnesses to vouch for the belief that had Bissell lived he would have received the Republican nomination in 1860.

On the thirteenth day of October, 1914, a daughter of this distinguished man of Illinois died in Belleville. She was Rhoda Bissell Thomas.

Rhoda Bissell was born in Belleville April 21, 1844. While she was still an infant, her mother died and her father married again in 1853. After the father's election as governor in 1856, the family moved to Springfield. There, she and her sister Josephine and the mother presided over the domestic and social affairs of the Executive Mansion for nearly four years, during which time they endeared themselves to a multitude of visitors from all parts of the State. She met Lincoln and other notables frequently and during those years preceding the Civil War, enjoyed the acquaintance of most of the illustrious people of the time. After the father's death she came back to Belleville. After the close of the war she married Charles Wait Thomas. He had seen service in the Civil War, but after his marriage pursued the practice of the law until he reached the pinnacle in his profession through his nomination for justice of the Illinois Supreme Court in 1906, to which position he would have been elected if he had not died before the election was held. After his death and after a few years' residence in Belleville, she went back to Springfield, where she remained until failing health necessitated her re-

turn to receive the kindly ministrations of her daughter and son-in-law, Dr. Portuando, in Belleville, the city of her birth, and also the city of her death. Her sister Josephine died in 1904. When the subject of this obituary passed away, she left as her most immediate relatives a daughter and two sons. These, in their loss, have the sympathy of a multitude of friends; and, those of us who knew her best, will, to the end of time, fondly remember the amiable disposition, the kindly character and the charming intellectuality of a noble woman.

RHODA BISSELL THOMAS — TRIBUTE FROM A
LIFE-LONG FRIEND.

Springfield, Monday, June 25, 1915.

821 South Second Street.

My dear Mrs. Weber:—

Your note of June 12th containing the request that I write an article about my girlhood, indeed, life-long friend, Mrs. Rhoda Bissell Thomas, has been neglected for two reasons: first, absence from the city; second, a subsequent illness, and I might add to the list the fact that I am very busy preparing for a summer in California. I beg you will, therefore, pardon my dilatoriness and accept the enclosed article. I do not know whether it is the kind of an article you want or not. Perhaps it is too much like an obituary or too biographical.

Let me know if it is what you want, or if you would like any changes made in it, and I will gladly comply with your idea.

Sincerely yours,

(Signed)

MARY RIDGELY HAY,

Mrs. C. W. Thomas, formerly Rhoda Bissell, was born, I think, in Belleville, Illinois, and was the second daughter of Governor William H. Bissell, first Republican governor of Illinois, and the only one who died during term of office, 1857-1860.

Governor Bissell was the father of two daughters, the other being named Josephine. He brought with him to the Mansion

a second wife, with three adopted nieces, children of a deceased sister or brother. These five children all went by the name of the "Bissell girls," when I knew them at that time—and charming bright girls they were. They were all educated at the Ursuline Convent and were always under very strict surveillance, not being allowed the liberty which the others of our set were permitted.

Rhoda always showed great literary taste and ability and books were her chief delight. She was an attractive girl in every way, possessing good features, particularly the eyes, to which Col. John Hay once addressed a poem called "Remembered Eyes." Of this she was very fond and preserved it to her dying day. Her disposition was amiable; her manner, ladylike and sweet. She married, in the late sixties, Mr. Charles W. Thomas, a lawyer of Belleville, Illinois, her former home, who afterwards became a judge. In spite of many trials she retained her sweetness of spirit and was a joy and delight to her friends. She did not enter the Roman Church during her convent life, but was for a time an Episcopalian, afterwards becoming a Roman Catholic. She died of a wasting disease last October, in Belleville, at her daughter's home, her husband having preceded her by some years. She left three children to mourn her death, the oldest, Bissell, the second, Mrs. Josephine Portuando, the third, Charles Edward Thomas. Springfield friends attended the funeral, which took place in Belleville, where she was laid by her husband's side.